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Summing UP

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Iowa State University

December 21, 1985

I imagine those of you on the upper reaches of this auditorium have noticed that the quality of this spectacle drops off as soon as your kid goes over the stage. I'll keep that in mind. If I were smart I'd quit right there.

I made most of my career here as one of the back-bench boys putting on hoods so I watched my colleagues perform with a good deal of professional jealousy. They didn't knock off a single mortar board, I thought they did very well.

We back-bench folks who serve as marshalls at Commencements are seldom given the chance to address the new graduates and that is perhaps a serious loss because who have been to more Commencements than we, or heard more orations and exhortations than we? Who has seen more people yawn after they've gone across the stage than we?

I've been at this a long time. I started by chasing pigeons off the back balcony benches in old State Gym as an usher for Commencement about 1956; worked

up to leading in the Colleges (a big step forward) and finally made it to the big time, because of my height and reach, of herding in the President's party (an irascible bunch) and hooding the new doctors.

In fact, I have been at this so long that I am reminded of Radar O'Reilly's classic statement: "I came here in my puberty, I probably won't get out until my adultery."

But in the process of sitting through so many Commencements I have been impressed by two things: 1) Looking out at the multitude of you I realize anew that it must be a truly marvelous country that can gainfully employ such vast crowds as are graduated here and at every other university each semester. And you *will* be employed regardless of your status today. Secondly, I am impressed by the diversity of speeches that I've heard while sitting up here on the stage even though I remember only two at the extremes. Nor do I really expect you to remember

this one — you went out of gear about 85 minutes ago. One was at my own doctoral commencement and was given by Secretary John Foster Dulles. It ran to almost an hour on a hot June forenoon in the Armory. I have never forgiven a Washington politician after that. At the other extreme there was a 12 minute talk by Dr. Keith Huntress of our own English department given 15 years ago to a winter graduating class of 500. (You could get through a little quicker in those days.) This was at the final peak of the student unrest and distrust of anyone older than they were, and Keith called his talk "On a Note of Optimism". It was a marvel of understanding of the human equation and has been a model for Commencement addresses for everyone of us who heard it.

But I am not the profound and gentlemanly humanist that Keith Huntress is, nor do I have the austere and dogmatic presence that Secretary Dulles had. Therefore I am going to forego the temptation to discuss the impassioned arguments of conservation vs. preservation between John Muir and Gifford Pinchot at the turn of the century that might logically be of interest to a forester. I will bypass one of my specialities, the mathematics of non-declining timber yield, and the unknowns of acid rain or slash-and-burn agriculture in the tropics.

I won't even make heartfelt comment about the necessity and responsibility of a society through its citizens and its government to provide stewardship for those frail resources of forest and soil and water and clean air and aesthetics. I know too much and feel too strongly about these matters — we wouldn't be out of here in time for Christmas, if I get started on that.

But after a life-time of speculation I believe I understand the MYSTERY OF LIFE to the extent of about a 9 minute commencement address and that's what you are going to hear — a generic

commencement address. While it is a process seldom done well the matter of a parent or an elder summing up a lifetime and handing it on to the captive audience of children or new graduates is part of the rites of passage for me, the borer, as well as you, the boree.

I do have this problem when it comes to handing on advice — and, after all, as Oscar Wilde said, what else can one do with advice *but* hand it on; it's certainly no good to oneself! And that's the trouble, you see. If you read at all you very soon discover that the best idea you ever had has already been thought of by dozens of people before you and that at least one found a better way of expressing it than you ever will. That's how one becomes a quoter. You're ashamed of some piddling statement that someone else made in ringing terms long before you.

The truth of it is that I have lectured too much in the last 37 years. I recently figured out how many words I have spoken just in lectures. It turns out that I have talked steadily for 7,760 8-hour days. No wonder my hearing went out 20 years ago. Why, it would have killed me if I'd had to listen to all that. If written down this would make up a 16 foot shelf of 167 500-page books. I am appalled at the verbosity and am put to wondering if there was anything at all *original* in all that. It seems terribly reminiscent of the infinity of monkeys with an infinity of typewriters hoping to recreate Hamlet by chance.

I have good reason to wonder about my originality. In my collegiate youth I thought I was some punkins as a writer and took a creative writing course under Dr. Pearle Hogle who once said, "Mr. Thomson, your work is both original and good" — and then spoiled it with that old wheeze of English instructors, "unfortunately the original part doesn't amount to much".

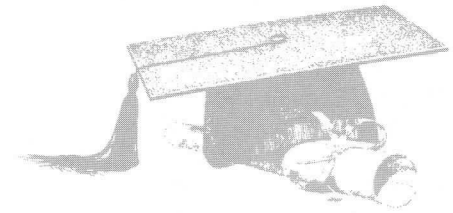
My Grandpa Thomson, 7th son, fled Edinburgh, Scotland, under magesterial

reprimand for poaching rabbits on Crown land back in 1848. When he came to America for the Gold Rush a year later he carried, I am told, a Bible, the collected works of Shakespeare and the poems of Robert Burns. My father, also a 7th son, (this is supposed to be lucky in Scottish families, you know, although my Dad claimed that you were mostly lucky if they didn't knock you in the head at birth) grew up with a mish-mash of quotations from these three sources and apparently handed them, plus the propensity for quoting them, on to me. To this day I'm not entirely sure whether, "Ah, some Power'd the giftie gie us to see ourselves as others see us" comes from the Parables, Macbeth or Robert Burns. Maybe it doesn't matter and I should just say, "Like the feller says —" and call it quits.

When I left home after college to go off to WW II my Dad called up his experiences as a young boomer telegraph operator in the dozen or so railroad depots that he worked in Illinois and Iowa before returning to farming. He said:

"From the minute a freight car is built some dispatcher has his eye on it. All of its Bills of Lading care kept, every place it has gone, every road traveled, every bit of maintenance, every wreck it has been in — everything — until the day it is junked is on record. A man is like that. See to it that you're never ashamed of your record."

Now that may not match up with Polonius' farewell admonitions to Laertes: "This above all to thine ownself be true; and it must follow as the night the day thou canst't not then be false to any man". That was classic stuff but that's not the way Illinois farmers talk. But it was darned good — and an original — and I remembered it.



Thinking of this parental obligation to advise when my middle son graduated and left for the West Coast I asked him if there were any axioms of *mine* that he particularly remembered. "Yes," he said, "there were two. Never lug a truck in high, and never run a horse down hill". Those are certainly words to live by! Oddly, we owned neither a truck nor a horse.

Having devoted most of my life to the education of young men for the nominally, at least, hairy-chested profession of Forestry I have good reason to be unsure of myself when advising the young women out there among you. I was deprived of sisters and produced no daughters so, despite the fact that a quarter of my Forestry students now are women and the second woman forester to graduate in the United States back in 1931, came from Iowa State, I am generally considered well-meaning but ignored

when it comes to the advising of the distaff portion of my student friends.

Thus I have had to pick up advice on the development of young women from any source that I can find. Just last month I listened to Louis Rukeyser of Wall Street Week on television when he commented on the fact that all-female investment clubs tend to do better than all-male clubs. The reason for this, he said, is, "Women get early training in skepticism. By the time the average female has reached 15, she had learned to look through the pitch for the motive — and that is helpful in finance." Once I had heard that I relegated the only other piece of advice I had acquired to second place. That came from my counterpart and good friend, Dr. Merle Meyer of the Forestry School of the University of Minnesota. Since he raised daughters while I was raising sons I once asked him if he had developed any particular concepts in the advising of young women. He said that, as far as daughters went, he tended to leave this to their mother but he did know one thing: "When a girl starts wearing hose be sure that she has learned to clip her toenails." You can see how hard it is to get good advice nowadays.

So, after a good deal of thought I believe that I have only two rules to hand on in this commencement address that are universal and devoid of implications of gender. These, of course, presume that — having now pocketed your degree from this fine institution — you are well qualified technically to start your respective careers.

Rule 1 (which I borrowed from the Talmud some years ago.

This would be a surprise to my Presbyterian father and Congregational mother but they would heartily endorse the sentiment).

"What is hateful to you, never do to a fellow man. That is the whole law — all the rest is commentary".

The second one comes from Harlan Miller's "Over the Coffee" as it appeared in the Des Moines Register long before Donald Kaul took it over. He used this phrase many times; I suppose partly as a space filler but I think he believed it. *I believe it.*

"There is no solution — seek it lovingly".

So that's it — my own summing up. A distillation of my lifetime and a Reader's Digest version of all that I have thought and read. It doesn't seem much to have acquired, does it? It's something like the man who carried around a brick ". . . so that all might see how fine his house once used to be".

But at least I have escaped the far harder task of demonstrating that Santa Claus does not exist even though you can see him; but that the wolf at the door is real even though you can't see him.

So I join with your family, your friends and faculty in wishing you good fortune and Godspeed. As with all family members left behind when the young leave home I give you the age-old blessing that's been handed down in my family generation after generation: "Write when you get work".

Have a happy holiday. Let the good times roll.

George W. Thomson
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